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Bed falls and hot water burns are leading causes of infant injuries – study

Falls and burns significantly contribute to the burden of infant injuries in Cape Town, according to a new study published in the [*South African Journal of Child Health*](#).

In the study, researchers from the University of Cape Town (UCT) and Erasmus MC-Sophia Children's Hospital in The Netherlands used data collected by ChildSafe SA from the Red Cross War Memorial Children's Hospital in Cape Town over a four-year period from January 2013 to December 2016. A total of 2 279 injured infants less than one year of age admitted to the hospital's trauma casualty department were included in the study.

Falls were the most frequent cause of injury, comprising 42% of all injuries. Falls from bed accounted for almost half of the fall injuries (49%). Other common types of falls were falls from attendants' arms (16%), falls from toy devices or playground equipment (8%), falls from stairs (6%) and falls from furniture (4%).

Burn injuries were the second-most common cause of injury in the total group (32%) and were more often seen in male than female infants. Hot water burns contributed to over 80% of all burns.

"Our study found that most burns had been sustained in the home environment. Flame burns were more frequently seen in the youngest age groups, while hot water burns occurred more frequently in infants more than six months old. The increased vulnerability for burns with older age can be explained by the fact that when a child is able to stand upright, he or she can more easily reach for hot objects and loose hanging kettle cables," said study author Sebastian van As, a professor at UCT and former head of the trauma unit at the Red Cross War Memorial Children's Hospital.

This study, the first in South Africa to investigate the exact causes of infant injury, found that 84 infants were injured due to being struck. Of these 84 cases, 51% resulted in tissue damage such as abrasions, lacerations and closed tissue injuries. Of the 73 assaulted infants, 82% were physically assaulted, 14% sexually assaulted, and 4% abandoned or neglected.

"There was a significant association between assault and age group in that assault was mostly seen in the two youngest age groups. Females were more frequently victims of sexual assault, whereas physical assault was seen more often in males," said van As.

The study found falls were the leading cause of injury in infants aged nine months. "Owing to infants' rapid growth and developmental changes, the frequency and mechanism of falls change with increasing age."

A previous study found younger children were more likely to be dropped from a caregiver's arms or fall from the furniture. "Our findings support this and suggest that infants under six months of age are at particular risk of being dropped. Parents should therefore be educated about the fast development of mobility in infants to create more awareness of the hazards in the infant's first year of life," noted van As.

"It is striking that even though infants under three months of age are usually not able to roll over, almost half of the infants aged 0-2 months who had experienced a fall were reported to have fallen out of bed. This raises some serious concerns about the veracity of the history provided, and should be considered a marker for child abuse until proven otherwise."

The significant burden of these injuries emphasises the urgent need for targeted prevention strategies to improve infants' safety, especially within the home, he said.

He recommended: "Interventions should be devised that take poverty into account. Findings also suggest that abuse is under-recognised, more research into determinants that predict child abuse in a standardised way is necessary. The use of a screening tool at the trauma unit should be considered."

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